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ABSTRACT

This study offers a portrait of the schooling experiences of black South African student teachers. Approximately 1,000 students were involved in the study, which was conducted over 5 years. The project was designed to help the instructor examine curriculum studies courses for their ability to enable student teachers to reflect on their own practice and engage in curriculum issues. Most students at the university (University of Durban-Westville) are black and of Indian or African descent, but the student body is greatly diversified in terms of ethnicity, economic status, language, and religion. They graduated from high school in a number of different education departments, each for an exclusive race or ethnic and language group. Common themes emerged from their experiences. The first is that schools are violent places, characterized by political, state-linked, or gender violence. A second theme is that South African schools for blacks are steeped in authoritarian culture, a reflection of the apartheid system. Another characteristic of the schools is that learning meant memorizing, that school success meant regurgitation of facts. A fourth theme was that learning is very difficult for the poor. A final common theme was that language makes a big difference. Black African children typically had to learn in a second or third language, and could be punished for speaking their own languages. The experiences of black students hold a number of implications for curriculum instruction, and require taking into account the discrepancies between the approaches being taught in teacher education and the actual experiences of students in their own schooling. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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PORTRAITS OF BLACK SCHOOLING IN SOUTH AFRICA

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1. Introduction

In February 1996, the Faculty of Education at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) in South Africa, interviewed prospective students for a place amongst its 260 new first year students. One staff member asked candidates what they thought of corporal punishment. Many gave refreshingly political incorrect replies, that are probably best summed up as: "Go for it!". The effectiveness of this kind of disciplining was embodied in their presence at this very interview: "I was punished and look...I made it to University!" This opinion, the affirmation of physical punishment, exemplifies and symbolizes something of a gulf between the schooling experiences of many of the students and the general outlook of the curriculum in our teacher education program.

This study offers a portrayal of schooling experiences of Black South African student teachers. The students are enrolled in Curriculum Studies classes that I teach at first to fourth year level. Approximately one thousand students were involved in this qualitative study, that was conducted over a period of five years. The project constitutes a platform to understand the historical location of the student teachers and to critically examine my Curriculum Studies courses in their ability to enable teachers to reflect upon their own practice and engage in curriculum issues as they prepare to work in classrooms and communities.

2. The Context of the Project

For most of the students currently enrolled as student teachers, the 1976 Soweto Uprising is an historical event that took place before they were even born. The Soweto Uprising is generally acknowledged as a watershed in South African history.

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It signified and symbolized the school as a major site of struggle against apartheid. Although not officially endorsed by all liberation movements, the slogan "Liberation Now; Education Later" became a powerful and popular battle cry, mobilizing the predominantly Black youth. Subsequent slogans such as "Education for Liberation" made appropriate inspiration for alternative education projects, but failed to permeate the solid walls of official curriculum in the apartheid schools. In spite of "...Education Later!", most South African children went to school right there and then, navigating frequent boycotts, states of emergency, under prepared teachers and a whole range of other obstacles in the way of learning. The majority of students in this project has endured their entire schooling career in this explosive post-Soweto (1976) and pre-general elections (1994) era. Yet they are motivated to return to the classroom as teachers in a new South Africa.

Most students at the University of Durban-Westville are Black and are of Indian or African descent. The student body is greatly diversified in terms of ethnicity, economic status, language and religion. They graduated from high schools in a number of different Education Departments. Before their transition into one Department for all schools, there were 17 Departments of Education in South Africa. Governed by apartheid policies, each one catered for an exclusive race, ethnic or language group. Schools were not only separate, they were also very unequal in many ways, particularly when it came to funding. Especially African students were significantly disadvantaged in the provision of schooling.

When I ask my students why they want to become teachers, their answers sound hopeful: "to educate the new leaders"; "to uplift the community" and "to undo the wrongs of the past". Yet, when asked for instance about punishment and discipline (hit them), or treatment of pregnant girls (expel them) (Nzimande; 1996) and other sensitive topics, I frequently wonder how their vision of change relates to the legacies of their own experiences, and how I, as their teacher, should or could respond. One of my responses has been to elicit their own stories of schooling and to use these stories as curriculum material in my courses.

My own experience in South Africa started in 1989. I inherited a course that was organized around "basic principles of classroom management". The course content consisted largely of case studies describing situations in British classrooms. These portraits of unruly English "lads" did not seem to resonate with the lives of student teachers in the strife-torn province of Kwa-Zulu Natal. They seem decidedly inappropriate in preparing teachers for the realities in South African schools. As a way of getting to know my students and reorganizing my courses, I asked each student to write about "One significant experience in school". Their stories form the basis of this study.

3. Searching for Themes

The research approach in this study is influenced by the Dutch Utrecht School of phenomenological pedagogy. The Utrecht School explicitly rejects the notion of a universal structure of consciousness, but "still recognizes intuitive scanning as a means of encountering the perceptual life world" (Willis; 1991). According to Willis (1991) the major value of this form of inquiry arises from "its affirmation that one's life-world can be known within the common sense world of every day experience, for this affirmation opens the way for descriptions of the life-world of others." In order to understand experience, one does not only reflect upon ones own perceptions, but opens up to a whole range of different forms of narrative or visual "text". In systematic inquiry, these texts are continuously (re)-interpreted in an exploration of what seems significant and what seems to typify particular experiences in ways that distinguish them from others. The Utrecht School developed a particular form of narrative inquiry that has its roots in European continental philosophy. Beekman and Mulderij (1977), Barritt et al (1983), van Maanen (1979, 1990), proponents of the Utrecht School, suggest a methodology that strongly emphasizes the use of narrative, empirical evidence of the life-world of others.
In a recent, comprehensive review of "the new narrative research", Casey (1995) focuses primarily on research in North America. She outlines the major manifestations of narrative inquiry and points at un(der)explored research directions.

She suggests that "the way in which children construct meaning in schools is a relatively unexamined and potentially exciting avenue of inquiry". This study aims to contribute to this specific area of educational research. At the start of the project, I asked students to write about 'a significant experience at school'. Purposefully, I did not ask them for a "good" or "bad" experience, but rather a symbolically meaningful narrative, capturing something of their overall perception of their own schooling. Through their narratives, that collectively provided the empirical base for my research, I interpreted and established common themes that appeared as shared experiences. From their stories, clear patterns began to emerge, in each class and over a number of years. Many stories described situations that could be similarly thematized. I systematically scrutinized these interpreted themes when I discussed them in class, observed in teaching practice schools, and compared them with relevant research reports and in fiction such as (auto)-biographies and novels. The main purpose of this was to seek confirmation and explore challenges and disagreements with my interpretations. These themes are not objective entities, or expressions of transcendental essence, they are my interpretations that have been debated with the students themselves, with my colleges and confirmed by external referents in the context of my work in schools or in other researched publications. Their value or 'truthfulness' lies only in their persuasiveness and usefulness as perceived by the reader. These 'common themes' are recognized and acknowledged as underlying "grammar" (van Maanen; 1979) of the phenomenon under investigation. In this case it is the "grammar" of Black schools in South Africa in the period 1976-1994. Its articulation can enable us not only to understand human perceptions, but also orient us to conscious action.

4. Black schooling in South Africa

There are five themes that emerge from the research. Each theme will be discussed separately. In reality, these themes don't present themselves as neat distinct packages, there are overlaps that will be evident to the reader. In each theme I will present some different angles followed by a set of analytical reflections.

4.1 Schools are violent places

" There were two political groups in my community. Both of the same nation[1]. One were schoolers who called themselves "Amaqabane". The others were non-schoolers who lived in the slums they called the "Amabutho's" (warriors). The difference they had that the Amaqabane prefered negotiations, the Amabutho's often used acts of violence. The story begins where the Amabutho's suspected Amaqabane that they were government puppets. We were in our class and then heard a crowd of people singing warrior songs. When we attempted to see, it was a group of men in a far distance. Fully armed, we soon realised we were about to be invaded. They were coming right in the school. Unfortunately their invasion lead them to tragedy. They carried knobkerries and long knives, but simply we threw stones at them, they were falling one by one. Many managed to escape. Six of the Amabutho falled and they were "necklaced" with a tyre. Petrol was poured in a tyre and they were set alight until they died. I was frustrated that the government would decide to cease classes."

The first prominent theme that emerges from the research is that schools are violent places. The students describe many forms of violence. The above example illustrates political violence, where the conflict originates in the political arena and quickly and in "messy" ways finds its way to every day life in the community and thus in the school. Many students had to interrupt their schooling career because of political violence. Schooling thus became a checkered path with little continuity. Political violence could be a point of consideration when selecting a school, as described in the next story:

"When I was living in the rural area, I left my school. I did this because things were unacceptably dangerous. My mother was very unhappy. My activities brought danger to our house. I had one brother who had dissapeared. We couldn't speak about that brother. I had to school in another place. I stayed in my uncle's house who lived in Durban, in Kwa Mashu. It was in this school that I had no enemies inside"

Danger could also come in forms that were more obviously linked to State violence, such as in this story:

[1] The authors of this story tells us that both groups are Zulu 6

> "The police van stopped right in front of the school and we all looked out of the window. Two police men got out. They carried rifles. They went to the office of our principal. When they came out they went to the standard nine class and ordered some of them to sit in this van. They then drove off. We despised the principal from now on. He found his car later with the tyres slashed. Later he was replaced".

This account show us that school became a dangerous place once you were identified as a danger to the State. The school could be the place where "they" could locate and arrest you.

Another category of violence can be labeled as gender violence, where students recall experiences of sexual harassment and rape. These stories were not as freely described as the previous ones, and were often told verbally, after class, when a woman would say: I really wanted to write about that but I was too scared or embarrassed. A disturbing fact was that a number of their stories described the involvement of teachers:

> "I was at boarding school and some of the teachers lived in small rooms on the school property. We all knew that this teacher romanced some sweethearts. Some girls were honoured but others were embarrassed or scared to reject him"

Some stories indicate non-interference on the part of teachers when it was clear that girls were harassed or even raped right near the school buildings, as in the following story (told verbally):

> " Our school did not have proper toilet facilities and therefore we had to go in the nearby field. This created a very bad situation. We all knew that some girls had been taken advantage of, but I couldn't believe it when it actually happened to me. I felt so embarrassed and cried. I told one of my friends but I didn't want to report it at school out of fear of revenge. I think the teachers knew that those things happened frequently but they too were powerless. "

This story suggests that girls at school were taught that they are 'on their own' when it comes to sexual harassment and sexual violence. In this way, schools replicated and perpetuated unequal power relations between men and women and the cycle of domestic violence.

4.2 Schools are steeped in an authoritarian culture

The authority of teachers and particularly principals, reflected the apartheid order which was hierarchical and punitive. Their authority fell within a framework of the discriminatory stratification of apartheid education. In the eyes of the students, many teachers were seen to represent the wrong side of ideological conflicts. This caused a climate of distrust which took on various forms in different contexts. The next story takes place in the context of a rural farm school:

> "At the age of 12, I was doing standard one at Kafferstad farm. The school was in a white man's farm. One had to abide with the regulations laid by this man, if he wished to go to school. Every boy should serve the white, no matter what his father wished, so ours was to do what our "baas" tells us to do. Because I liked the school more than I can say, I turned a deaf ear on the call of this white man. He came to school to fetch me. It was early in the morning I was very frightened as looking at this son of Afrikaners was not an easy thing. My principal was not aware that I needed his protection. He did not argue so I can say that he betrayed me. He was on the side of the white man. My job would be to milk the cows in the morning and in the afternoons. So this was the daily order of my life. Things changed now, I became more interested in milking cows than going to school. One day my teacher asked me a simple question that I could not answer. He gave me six of the best. I cursed the white man. The relationship with my teacher deteriorated. If it was not that my mother intervened I would have left school in that year."

This story highlights the complex relationships in schools between teachers and pupils in the farmer-owned rural schools in South Africa. From this story it is clear that the pupil's own interests do not (or can not?) come first to his teacher. The farmer as the landowner, and the employer of both the teacher and the boy's parents, made the incontestable rules. The teacher in this story is said to be "on the side of the white man", facilitating the white man's rules and thus contributing to the maintenance of the farmer's powerful and superior position.

In the next story we find an example of the lack of trust in an urban setting, where the principal was seen to participate in the political conflict by collaborating with the so called warlords in the community:

> "In 1990, it was probably the hardest year for any school child in the Durban townships. Political violence was rife. Principals were openly siding with warlords and pupils were attacked brutally and many lost their lives. So the role of principals of the old order is quite unforgettable. Many pupils had to leave schools. It was only after Mr. Mandela's call that everyone must go back to school that schools were once more overloaded, but I will not forget the selling out of pupils by principals"

Similar to the boy in the farm school, there is a sense of betrayal when this story relates the experience of being sold out. One response to the punitive control exercised at school was to rebel against such inflexible authority. Principals became the symbolic targets for a myriad of frustrations, that were often rooted in racist government policies (e.g. Black school children have to buy their own text books). This is described in the next story:

> "They told us one day that we must have books. All of us. If you fail to have a book you get strong punishment or send back at home. It was on Monday in the morning when the teachers started to check the books. The students riot against the principal's law. They throw stones at the principal's office. The principal was seriously injured by the students. The school closed for 3 weeks. At the end of the year half the students in school failed."

The authoritarian culture in school impacted not only on the human relationships between teachers and learners but also on the way in which knowledge was selected and acquired. It is obvious from most stories that teachers presented themselves as 'reservoirs of facts', where students had to silently accept these 'facts' as incontestable forms of knowledge that needed to be accumulated over the years. Intervention in the learning process, such as asking critical questions, suggested that the teacher might be "wrong". This could be regarded as a violation of authority and showing disrespect to the teacher. Consider the next story:

> "Miss V. was my teacher when I was 12 years old. There was a great hostility between us. The cause of that hostility was that I need to ask some questions whilst she was teaching us. I asked these questions to be clear about what she was teaching. Instead of answering my questions she used to tell me that I might accept everything coming from her without asking any question and she promised to reply with a clap [slap] if I would repeat questions to her"

The exercise of this kind of discipline in schools took on great importance because it became the way through which power and authority were perpetuated. In order to maintain this form of authority, teachers used humiliation as a weapon. Many students described how they were physically punished in public:

> "The teacher one day came to us and she told us that she had devised a mechanism by which we are going to find it easier to understand math's. She told us that she will teach us and give us some work to do at home. But, if you get one sum wrong, you will be rightly punished by two claps on your face. In the end it was total abuse, She gave 20 sums daily as our homework and she ended up not teaching us, not trying to understand our problems, but spending the entire class period giving us claps in our faces. It appeared that she was only interested in embarrasing and abusing us"

Or as in the next story:

> "For every answer that was wrong he gave us a stroke. I received four strokes. It hurt so much. My soul was like a berieved fiancee"

Other students mention more "subtle" forms of exposure and public embarrassment:

> "Every time I looked at him I hoped that his facial expression would turn into a smile but my hopes were in vain.... A few weeks later he gave a test. Later that week he informed us that he was very disappointed with the results and that he wanted to read out one of the most ridiculous answers he had ever received. To my dismay he read out aloud to the class my answer. This was the most embarrassing moment of my life. I was so ashamed that I stormed out crying".

4.3 Learning means Memorizing

When asked for her definition of learning, one of my students recently volunteered: "building a store house of memory". This accurately reflects the way knowledge was treated in school, like in the example below:

> "There was one boy in our class who always gave the right answer. He was asked to come to the chalkboard to write his answer. The teacher was very pleased with him. It was this boy who was her favorite. It was because he remembered too much."

Success in school often meant a correct requrgitation of 'facts'. The teacher and the textbook were the exclusive sources of knowledge that mattered in school. This uncritical treatment of knowledge still persists. In a 1995 teaching practice session in a nearby school, one of my students asked a class of ten year old children: "Jan van Riebeeck[2], was he a good or a bad man?" Not surprisingly, the entire class agreed that the "correct" answer had to be 'a good man'. The student teacher followed up by noting on the board: 'Jan van Riebeeck was a good man because he gave the people land'. When questioned after the lesson, she conceded that she did not agree with this historical interpretation but felt that, since it was in the textbook, it had to be taught. There is a real sense that there is an externally pre-determined amount of information that has to be processed in school and learned "off by heart" in order to be ready for examinations. When certain information was not passed on there was trouble:

> " My class was combined with another standard 7 to write this paper. It was found that our collegues from the other class were getting notes which we didn't have. My class pupils got scared. I was one of the lucky ones because I guessed most of the answers. The rest of my collegues wrote that they didnot have that section and as a result obtained low marks as well as a good scolding from my home economics teacher for writing on the paper that she didn't do that section with us."

A number of stories relate how students became resourceful in handling this way of teaching and learning. They found ways of subverting this system like in the next example:

> "Through a cousin of one of my class mates we found out that this particular teacher used the same questions he used five years ago because he used to work at another school and this cousin still had her notes and tests and what have you. Soon we started a flourishing market in these tests. It was great fun. He, the teacher that is, did get suspicious but it worked for a while."

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[2] This was the Dutch Admiral who in 1652 landed in the Cape and lead the settlement of European colonizers in South Africa

The focus on memorization of externally determined content excluded both teachers and learners from taking effective control of the learning environment. It has contributed to a learning culture that dismisses curiosity as a motivation in school and privileges students who don't question.

4.4 Learning is tough when you are poor

A great number of stories discuss the difficulties experienced at school due to poverty. Poverty could result in a number of things. In the first place it made schooling feel like a privilege that was hard to attain. Many students mention that it was hard to get enough money to pay school fees. This could jeopardize schooling, as described here:

> "While I was in Standard 8 in 1989, there were a lot of strikes and as a result I didn't pass. So I had to repeat my same class. My parents were not having money to take me back to school until they borrowed from the other person"

It could also mean that one could get into difficulty for not being able to buy the prescribed books:

> "One day he told the class that we must buy history books and he said: "No one is allowed in my class if he has no book" He said that angrily. When I arrived at home and told my parents about that I was very disappointed because they said they had no money. Then came the day. I did as he said. Every time he entered the classroom I used to go out. At the end of the week he called me in and I entered the classroom. He wrote a test on the board and told us to write it. I was unable to write the test because I read nothing and knew nothing about it . I tried to write it and left some open spaces. He came and checked it and realised the open spaces. Then he punished me hardly. The result of my test was 30%. He suddenly brought a book for me. I worked very hard. At the end of the year I obtained a symbol B.

Poverty created conditions at home which made it hard to study. Particularly for girls whose mothers had to work and live away from the family, it could mean looking after younger children and performing a great deal of household duties. This could end or interrupt schooling, or make it difficult to pay attention to your school work:

"During the time that my mother worked for a 'madam' in Pretoria, I would have to fetch water which was not close to our location. At home I would have to wash clothes and cook the food and serve my grandfather and uncles. The trouble was that by the time I wanted to learn my notes, it was time to go to sleep"

Or as in the next story:

"Ours was a small place and there were many of us. I really didn't have a proper place to learn in concentration. I would try to visit the library after school to do homework. But the problem was that the library was in town of course and the bus costed too much money. These are the things I had to overcome."

It could also mean that it was hard to concentrate in class if one was hungry at school, as illustrated in this story:

"One day there was a counting of the people in our area. The whole process took place in our school. After it was over, the men decided to give all the left-overs to the pupils. I was very much happy to see a man carrying a box coming to our class. I realised that it was the biscuits. I felt very hungry. By the time they entered, our teacher was busy. In fact, she didn't want to be disturbed. After they left, Mrs. Zuma said: Nobody is going to eat before the bell rings!" I just couldn't hold myself because my tummy was empty. The time she was on the board, I took one and hid it under the desk."

4.5 Language makes a difference

South Africa is a multi-lingual country with at least 11 languages spoken inside its borders. Until recently, only English and Afrikaans were recognized as official languages. Policy dictated that all children were taught and examined in one of these two languages throughout most of their schooling career. For the majority of Indian, White and so called "Coloured" children it meant that they could learn in their first language. For most African children it meant that they had to learn in a second or third language. At some schools, speaking your own language could lead to punishment:

"At our boarding school we were not allowed to speak Zulu. On Mondays, the nuns would give out a card to one pupil. When you discovered another girl who spoke Zulu, you could pass that card to her. So the card would go around. At the end of the week, the girl who had the card would be punished"

In this way, it meant that one's first language was not only dismissed as the language of learning, but more generally also as a language of communication with your peers. It created a divisive situation where students were used to spy on each other. Relocating to different parts of South Africa could cause language problems at school. In the following story, the student felt that language was used as an instrument to deliberately exclude certain students in the learning process:

" When I was in high school, I happened to be in a Boarding school which is located near Pietersburg. Coming from Nelspruit, I spoke Swazi, Xhosa and Tsonga. Me and my friends experienced a lot of problems because many of our class mates were speaking Northern Sotho. We had a problem with one of the teachers. He had a negative attitude towards those who were not speaking Northern Sotho. As a result he would teach in English and explain difficult parts in N.Sotho which made it more difficult for us. However, by Easter I was beginning to understand N.Sotho but I hated the teacher very bad. He was responsible for my misery in Boarding School"

Language could thus become an effective weapon in the earlier discussed authoritarian climate in school. Like the author of the above story, many South Africans are multi-lingual, but this asset seems decidedly undervalued in school. The apartheid education system in the promotion of the official languages created a climate in which students were made to feel inadequate and frustrated about their language capacity:

"The teacher only used Afrikaans and spoke quickly. We could not understand a thing he was saying. We only noticed that he had asked a question when he was pointing some of us to answer it. When the period was over, he told us he was going to bring a cane the next day. Next day we all failed to answer the question because we did not hear and understand what he was talking about. Then he started giving us 5 strokes."

5: Reflections and implications

This qualitative study captures the personal schooling experiences of Black student teachers at the University of Durban-Westville. The research suggests that much of their schooling has been rooted in (1) violence,(2) authoritarianism,(3) passive ways of learning, (4) poverty and (5) language-medium difficulties. A confrontation with the ordinary and real schooling experiences of my own students poses a number of challenges. This final part of this paper offers some reflections and puts forward a set of possible implications.

The methodological strategy has value in that it illuminates the realities of students' lived experiences by allowing them to tell their own stories with a minimum of editorial inter-'rupture'. In the South African context, 'apartheid' has indeed kept people apart and in current times of transition, there is a great deal of curiosity to learn from others, across the race, ethnic, religious and other barriers that were imposed previously. The Government's White Paper on Education (1995) stresses: "The complex legacies ...live on in the present. Difficult as it may be to do so, South Africans need to understand each other's history, culture, values and aspirations, not to turn away from them, if we are to make the best of our common future."

The research has theoretical implications for the study of schooling. The inherited oppressive conditions of schooling in this country demand a critical analysis that is "not dis-articulated from power, agency and history" (Giroux, quoted in Freire and Macedo; 1995). Macedo argues that when educators fail to "link experiences to the politics of culture and critical democracy", they reduce their pedagogy to "a form of middle-class narcissim". Therefore, just "sharing stories" is insufficient. It is not enough to hear how it feels to learn in a violent place on an empty stomach. Many students actually already know that. Further, the research suggests that a theory of education cannot be dislocated from a theory of transition (Jansen; 1995, 1996); that is, the premises of an education for a critical citizenry in a 'new South Africa' cannot proceed without recognizing the continuities prevalent in its current transitionary stage. Narrative research can make a valuable contribution in transitionary times, as Casey (1995) concludes: "dynamic social

conditions mean that people's interpretations are continually in flux", and she asserts: "What better way to grapple with making sense of our rapidly changing world than through the world of stories?"

The research findings suggest that the students' experiences and perceptions hold a number of curriculum implications. They could form a starting point for curriculum development, teaching strategies and assessment procedures. The stories and themes that emerged in this research, anchor my courses and serve as a platform to explore, recognize and interpret the structural conditions of the inherited system of apartheid schooling in general and curriculum issues in particular. It requires me to create opportunities for students to turn their personal experiences into knowledge that is rooted both in theory and in practice. This is not to suggest that the university curriculum should respond reflexively to students' experiences. It should also take those experiences, rooted in apartheid education, as the subject for challenge and change. It should actively counter the risk of students becoming teachers with similar oppressive values and beliefs imbibed from their own teachers during their schooling.

The research findings hold implications for educational policy and planning in the post-apartheid transition. For example, the new Government, through its Department of Education launched a "Culture of Learning" project. The main upshot of this campaign seems to be the restoration of school buildings that were neglected or destroyed in the apartheid era. While these material conditions are important to improve schooling, they are not enough to address what goes on inside the walls. Qualitative research such as this, highlights the idea that a new culture of learning doesn't follow automatically once the roofs have stopped leaking and the toilets have been installed.

Similarly, teacher education policy should be framed in the context of the realities and experiences of students as one critical dimension of teacher preparation for schooling in post-election South Africa.

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